

A letter from George V. Pedraza, Assistant to the City Manager

It has been several years since conflict over the city's growth patterns led Mayor Howard Peak and City Council to establish the Community Revitalization Action Group (CRAG), and we are already more than half-way through the second year of the program which consists of meetings, research, and recommendations. Now is an important time to reflect on the reasons why CRAG was formed, what CRAG has accomplished and, finally, how CRAG will impact our community in the future. This interim report will address these questions and provide a brief update on six of the public meetings we have held during the past seven months; look for a full report by mid-summer.

Since its inception, CRAG has been a partnership between the San Antonio community and our City Government. We would like to thank all of those who have played such an integral part in the success of these initiatives and continue to invite our community to share in CRAG's efforts.

Sincerely,

*George V. Pedraza
Assistant to the City Manager*

What is CRAG?

The Community Revitalization Action Group (CRAG) was created in 1998 as part of the Mayor's initiative to identify impediments to revitalization in San Antonio, as well as highlight initiatives or models contributing to revitalization that could be expanded or replicated. Members of the group consisted of a variety of individuals from the public and private sector, professionals, and residential communities. The goals of revitalization included: enhancing community cohesiveness, sustaining a strong urban system, and coordinating efforts to offset urban decline and

encourage balanced development. Thirty-eight action recommendations were proposed in the final CRAG Report presented to City Council in July of 1998. A total of more than \$1.2 million were allocated in the 1998-1999 Annual City Budget to address and implement CRAG recommendations; in the 1999-2000 Budget, more than \$1.8 million in additional funds were allocated.

Background from 1998 CRAG Report

San Antonio is a unique city with a strong history of civic involvement. San Antonians care deeply about their city and are proud of its history, landmarks, and neighborhoods. When neighborhoods decline everyone is affected through increased political conflict, social tension, crime, and higher taxes. Reversing this process of decline will require a reinvestment and a recommitment on the part of the community as a whole.

To respond to the needs of neighborhoods, particularly those inside Loop 410, Mayor Howard Peak and the City Council convened 23 citizens of diverse backgrounds and experience to form the Community Revitalization Action Group (CRAG). Its work was supported by a large and diverse Resource Group of 40 volunteers and by an 18-member Neighborhood Group, including community leaders from each Council district.

The group was asked to: 1) identify impediments to revitalization, 2) analyze and recommend means to expand successful initiatives contributing significantly to revitalization, especially inside Loop 410, and 3) focus on the role of private investment and identify ways to encourage public/private partnerships. CRAG met from the end of February, 1998 through June, 1998, holding eight meetings of the entire group but more commonly gathering in smaller subgroups, often several times each week.

CRAG Approach

What did the CRAG find? *Revitalization rebuilds communities from within.* The residents who remain or choose to move into older areas provide the energy and assets needed to create a sustainable, safe, and livable place. Their ideas, skills and organizing abilities are the foundation on which private capital investments can build residential and commercial projects. Local governments facilitate and sustain revitalization by supporting a successful partnership of people, organizations, and capital.

Key principles of the CRAG approach

- *Extend the impact of public funds through careful targeting and through partnerships with private investors and communities*
- *Build on past efforts, including supportive Master Plan policies and the successful examples of revitalization already in place*
- *Encourage cooperation among all sectors of the city so that for-profit and non-profit groups can coordinate with City efforts and can build a broad-based revitalization effort that goes beyond government*
- *Use an action-based approach, creating performance reviews and incentives to get projects up and running as efficiently as possible*
- *Sustain revitalization as a high priority and look toward a permanent vehicle to focus these efforts and build on community commitment*

CRAG Priority Area--Neighborhood/Community Involvement: Because the involvement of community residents is critical in all areas of revitalization, the CRAG approach emphasizes providing new opportunities to help residents plan their own futures and

identify their needs. The City must nurture local leadership with new forms of assistance and strengthen the role of neighborhood plans in City decision-making.

CRAG Priority Area--Economic Development: At the heart of revitalizing neighborhoods are small business districts capable of generating new wealth and attracting new investment. CRAG recognizes the role the arts can play as economic generators and the role of small family business in creating new wealth. Neighborhood-level changes attract larger investments of public and private capital.

CRAG Priority Area--Housing: The City can play an important role in partnering with for-profit and non-profit housing developers. The CRAG approach asks the City to evaluate its many housing-related agencies as a single service delivery system, and assign high-level managers who can assist each project in meeting City requirements.

A total of 38 action recommendations were proposed in the Final CRAG Report, presented and adopted by City Council in July, 1998. Eight recommendations addressed neighborhoods, nine recommendations addressed economic development, and 21 recommendations addressed housing. CRAG implementation became a first tier Council Budget priority. Recommendations included:

- *Simplifying the Neighborhood Planning Process*
- *Establishing the Neighborhood Improvement Challenge Program*
- *Evaluating housing related agencies as a single service delivery system*
- *Maximizing public sector funds by leveraging with private sector funds*
- *Creating Tax Increment Financing Districts (TIFs) for community revitalization*
- *Expanding the Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization Program*

CRAG Implementation

Housing Services Delivery Review: In response to Housing Priority Action H-3, City Council retained a team of consultants to review the housing services delivery system in San Antonio. The review includes the operation of City departments such as Housing and Community Development and Neighborhood Action, local agencies such as the San Antonio Development Agency, and non-profit groups such as the San Antonio Housing Trust Foundation. Focus groups, individual interviews, document review, and site visits helped the consultants understand current housing programs and policies. The consultant team will present their findings to City Council in June, 2000, and their recommendations will be used to guide CDBG, HOME, and general fund allocations for fiscal year 2000-2001.

Neighborhood Improvement Challenge Program: Neighborhood/Community Involvement Priority Action N-2 called for the creation of mini-grant program to foster physical improvements and stimulate cooperation and planning. The Neighborhood Improvement Challenge Program gives neighborhood-based organizations the opportunity to implement small, public improvement projects in partnership with private groups. Projects range from a minimum of \$2,500 to \$5,000 in City funds and must be matched on a 50-50 basis by a private source of funds, labor, or in-kind contributions. Eligible organizations must be neighborhood-based, represent a defined geographic area smaller than the entire city, and be located within the city limits of San Antonio. Examples of eligible projects include public improvements such as murals, tree planting, landscaping, sidewalk and curb work, and road signage. Applications are submitted annually and compete by City Council district for the total budgeted amount of \$90,000 (FY98-99) and \$100,000 (FY 99-00).

Incentive Tool Kit: Housing Priority Action H-8 suggested the creation of an Incentive Tool Kit, which will ultimately house various city initiatives designed to encourage commercial and residential development in previously-overlooked areas of the City. Beginning with the Fee Waiver Policy, which will be presented to City Council in late spring or early summer, the tool kit will grow to contain an expanded tax abatement policy, revised guidelines for tax-increment financing districts, a single redevelopment assistance application, and expedited permit processing for inner-city projects.

Since the completion of CRAG, the concept of revitalization has been embraced as a priority by the City Council and by the City of San Antonio as an organization. The CRAG implementation process and community dialogue continues as part of the CRAG II program.

What is CRAG II?

The 1998 CRAG Report suggested that ongoing efforts should be made to provide an accessible forum for identifying new ideas and best practices; to evaluate progress in achieving revitalization; and to assist existing agencies to connect, coordinate, and build capacity. Specifically, the CRAG II program was charged with:

- *Building awareness and support for revitalization*
- *Conducting a Housing Services Delivery Review*
- *Compiling innovative community revitalization projects*
- *Providing additional recommendations for City of San Antonio initiatives and improvements*
- *Selecting target areas*

Public Meetings

As a part of providing an accessible forum for identifying new ideas and best practices, eight public meetings were scheduled. CRAG II public involvement creates awareness of revitalization issues and allows citizens to shape policies that will impact their neighborhoods. To date six meetings have been held with the goals of identifying new stakeholders and receiving input from a broad range of individuals and constituencies. During each meeting an “open house” was held so that participants could look at maps, plans, reports, historical information, and other materials related to the evening’s topic. Through small group discussions or facilitated question and answer sessions, participants shared their thoughts about growth and development in the inner city.

Balanced Growth, September 21, 1999, Alamodome, Room L

The first CRAG II public meeting addressed the recent growth and development of the City of San Antonio, emphasizing the relative conditions inside and outside Loop 410. Maps displayed information ranging from the assessed value of single-family lots in San Antonio to the location and names of area watersheds.

“Sprawl” refers to a low-density, automobile-dependent growth pattern. However, the property values, building permit, and housing age maps reviewed at the September 26th meeting showed that commercial and high-dollar residential growth has not occurred in the southern sectors of the city, despite the construction of Loops 410 and 1604.

After viewing the maps and seeing a presentation on the patterns and impact of growth, citizens broke into discussion groups to address the following questions. The ideas generated during these discussions would be used in future meetings to lay the groundwork for each topic and continue the thread of conversation.

Q: How do you define Balanced Growth?

A: “equitable availability of physical, economic, and human resources needed to stimulate quality growth and development.”

“...mixed housing types, commercial, and business opportunities, supported by City tools such as zoning codes that provide lifestyle options (low density vs. higher density, changing needs as life situation changes).”

“...equal allocation of resources and services throughout the entire city, creating equity of economic and socio-economic services, cultural amenities, schools and mixed income communities.”

Q: How have growth and development patterns in your neighborhood or community deteriorated over the past five years?

A: Citizens have left our inner city neighborhoods. They have the perception, whether it is correct or not, that there is more crime, less access to shopping, a lower quality school system, and a lack of places for neighbors to connect with one another inside Loop 410 as compared to outside Loop 410.

Q: How have growth and development patterns in your neighborhood or community improved over the past five years?

A: Partnerships with private and non-profit sectors have brought investments to our neighborhoods.

Our neighborhoods have continued to maintain their character, quality of environment, and sense of community.

Our communities and elected officials have raised the their expectations of what is an acceptable level of quality of life.

Transportation & Infrastructure, October 26, 1999, Alamodome, Room L

Presentations from the City of San Antonio Public Works Department, VIA Metropolitan Transit, San Antonio Water System, City Public Service, Metropolitan Planning Organization, and the Texas Department of Transportation set the stage for a citizens' discussion of Transportation and Infrastructure issues. Once again, participants were randomly assigned to small groups to address questions. Interestingly, although the questions specifically referred to transportation and infrastructure improvements, some participants responded with suggestions about land use regulation, design guidelines, and connections between schools and communities. These suggestions were recorded and re-introduced at later meetings.

Q: What characteristic elements of transportation and infrastructure investments support revitalization?

A: Improved quality of infrastructure (design and materials)

A design, planning, and project decision-making process which involves the public

Accessibility—"friendly" for pedestrians, children, the disabled

Bus stops and convenient stores connected by sidewalks

Q: What specific transportation and infrastructure investments would support revitalization efforts in this community?

A: Expressway improvements—noise abatement, "burying" the expressway underground

Improve street and sidewalk quality—plant trees, more street lights

Bus system improvements—review routes; provide attractive bus stops; use smaller buses in neighborhoods

Light rail service

Develop linear parks and "Green Belts" to provide more open space, watershed protection

Develop an off-road bicycle system

Health & Public Safety, November 30, 1999, Central Library

At the November 30 meeting, participants discussed the relationship between public safety and health and revitalization. Representatives of the City of San Antonio Police and Fire Departments, the Metropolitan Health District, and other health organizations were on hand to provide information and materials about the progress and future of the inner city. For example, police records show that the reporting areas with the highest crime are located outside Loop 410, rather than in the inner city. Similarly, mental health advocates warned that problems such as child abuse and addiction can be found in any neighborhood, and are not confined to one area, social class, or ethnic group.

Rather than breaking into smaller groups after the presentations, the participants contributed to a moderated discussion about connections between such diverse issues as mental health, services for senior citizens, arson, and the vitality of the inner city. Observations included:

- Typical suburban design can contribute to isolation among the elderly and/or disabled, because automobiles are required to access most services and social opportunities.
- Coordination between agencies is critical. Service data for Police, Fire, and EMS should be consolidated to allow more efficient service delivery.

- Mobile health services or mini-clinics in neighborhoods can reach populations who don't have access to transportation or are not motivated to seek out basic health care.
- Better pedestrian spaces and opportunities for interaction would help create a healthier community by building connections between citizens.
- The key to decreasing crime is citizen involvement.

Housing, January 25, 1999, Central Library

Presentations and panelists were from Trinity University, Greater San Antonio Builders Association, Alta Vista Neighborhood Association, San Antonio Housing Trust, private sector developers and analysts, UU Housing Assistance Corporation, COSA Department of Housing and Community Development, and the San Antonio Housing Authority.

At the beginning of the January 25th meeting, those in attendance participated in a visual preference survey of housing types in San Antonio. Attendees noted that a recent Affordable Parade of Homes, a historic rehabilitation project and a SAHA development represented types of housing projects that they would not mind seeing in their own neighborhoods. A description of San Antonio's physical growth and development of its suburbs by Professor Char Miller of Trinity framed the panel's dialogue. As demonstrated by Professor Miller, several historical development projects had a strong impact on the city's future growth and housing development (i.e. Olmos Dam, street car lines).

With the history acknowledged, the panelists discussed critical housing issues facing the city today and also responded to questions posed by the audience. The discussion focused on ways to attract new housing development in the inner city and the challenges facing private and non-profit developers in that endeavor. Inner-city land

development costs, troubled school systems, and the potential for gentrification were key issues the panelist and audience explored in the lively discussion.

Economic Development, February 22, 2000, Central Library

The February 22nd meeting opened with a review of economic development concepts, followed by an overview of trends affecting the inner city. The evening concluded with a panel discussion and a question and answer session in which audience members asked local specialists about trends, opportunities, and policies. Questions and answers included:

Q: What can the community do to make their neighborhood more attractive to business?

A: Neighborhood associations and homeowners groups can make their community more attractive to business by improving the appearance of the area (participate in anti-graffiti and other clean-up programs); helping keep crime rates low (implement a neighborhood watch); and supporting programs such as the Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization program, in which a full-time "manager" is hired to recruit and support local businesses.

Q: How do you fund revitalization of areas within Loop 410 without under-funding other areas, thereby creating the same investment needs in a few years?

A: Revitalization programs need to focus on leveraging private-sector funds so scarce public dollars will go further. At the same time, the CRAG policies being considered now should help create a healthier urban environment, benefiting the whole city.

Q: What links the approval of economic development funds to the existence of infrastructure? Should they be linked to encourage in-fill development?

A: The CRAG II approach calls for the selection of a target area, in which infrastructure provision will be coordinated with incentives for commercial and residential redevelopment.

Education, March 28, 2000, The University of Texas at San Antonio Downtown Campus

The evening began with a keynote address and a moderated panel featuring local education experts. A more broad-ranging discussion followed, with the focus on the relationship between schools and communities. Speakers included representatives from the University of Texas at San Antonio, the Alamo Community College District, the Edgewood Parent Teacher Association, the San Antonio Independent School District and the Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio. The meeting concluded with a “brainstorming” session on how citizens can support and improve their schools; more than 40 ideas were collected. Suggestions included:

- Schools, colleges, and universities should share meeting space with other organizations, and allow campuses to be used as clearinghouses for neighborhood services.
- School districts should coordinate purchasing and other services to achieve efficiencies of scale.
- Mentoring programs should be expanded by giving college students credit for mentoring younger students and by enlisting retirees as potential mentors.
- A regular forum for the exchange of ideas about education should be created.

- Schools should provide parenting/family skills classes at middle and high school level.
- A centralized source of information for parents of special needs children should be available.
- All partners should support existing programs, including San Antonio Education Partnership, Upward Bound, and Tech Prep.

Remaining CRAG II Public Meetings

Civic Participation, 5:30-7:30 PM, May 2, Central Library Auditorium

Human Development, 5:30-8:00 PM, May 30, Central Library Auditorium

Free validated parking and refreshments will be available at both meetings.

CRAG Policy and Program Implementation

The 1998 CRAG report recognized that in order to be most effective, revitalization efforts would have to be focused on specific geographic areas. Noticeable improvements in one inner-city neighborhood would not only provide the degree of stability sought by private investors, but would produce a positive impact on the surrounding community. Much as blight had spread through the inner city, revitalization would have a ripple effect as residents spruce up their homes and businesses respond to new customers.

Regardless of the precise target areas selected, investment incentives will be available throughout the inner city; a tiered incentive structure will offer some benefits for investments inside Loop 410 and greater benefits within target areas.

Clearly, selection of the appropriate target areas is a critical decision. The areas must be large enough to offer opportunities for investment, but small enough that changes are concentrated and visible. The target areas must have resources that make them attractive for development, but must exhibit typical characteristics of disinvestment so that they can serve as good models for other inner-city communities. While no areas have yet been selected, several characteristics of a successful target area strategy have been defined:

- Use demographic data to describe and assess the areas
- Compile a resource inventory to assess opportunities within the areas
- Define the areas through the use of neighborhood and natural boundaries, such as school feeder patterns
- Identify existing organizational capacity and work to expand this capacity
- Tailor programs to address existing social and physical needs

Other CRAG II Initiatives

Metropolitan Policy Research Institute Survey

In conjunction with VIA Metropolitan Transit and the Fannie Mae San Antonio Partnership Office, CRAG commissioned a survey of San Antonio residents' perceptions about life inside and outside Loop 410. The Metropolitan Policy Research Institute of UTSA conducted a survey of 1,000 San Antonio households—500 living inside Loop 410 and 500 living outside Loop 410.

Overall, San Antonians were pleased with their homes and communities—more than 90% of respondents were satisfied with the quality of their neighborhood and housing. If they were to move, the large majority of respondents would stay in the same general area; that is, residents living inside the Loop would stay there, and residents living outside the Loop would not move inside. However, most respondents, even those outside the Loop, would consider moving to “a neighborhood inside Loop 410 within walking distance of small shops...a grocery store, some restaurants and easy public transit and light rail access...” Further questions helped determine the kinds of housing products and other amenities that various types of potential homebuyers are seeking, information that will guide the eventual CRAG 2000 policy recommendations.

Reaching Out: Best Practices for Educating Mexican-Origin Children and Youth

On Tuesday, May 9, from 5:30 to 7:00 PM, Dr. Harriett Romo will deliver a lecture on how effectively today's schools are serving the needs of Mexican-origin and other ethnic-minority students. Romo's lecture is the first to be sponsored by CRAG, as part of its charge to promote best practices that lead to healthy communities. The lecture is cosponsored by the UTSA College of Social and Behavioral Sciences and is open to the public. It will be held at the UTSA Downtown Campus, in the Frio Street Building, Room 1.406.